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THE PREPARATION OF COLLEGE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH¹

A. B. NOBLE

Iowa State College, Ames, Iowa

The catalogues of the leading universities list in the aggregate hundreds of courses in English, but only a few in the teaching of English. To succeed in teaching it may be quite as helpful to study how to teach English as to study English. In subject-matter the courses now offered leave little to wish for. They appear to include all the courses needed in composition, all periods in English literature, a sufficient range in comparative literature, and practically all authors and movements worthy of study.

But this very excellence may involve a danger. It may fix the interest of the graduate student on minor authors, movements, and problems, and leave him rusty on the very things he is soon to teach. It is likely to set him to digging on past rather than present issues, on problems of minute detail, rather than of fundamental principle; it may develop an interest in research rather than in teaching, in facts rather than in students, in getting, rather than in giving, knowledge. It may so absorb one's interest in problems of the past as to leave him out of touch with the problems of today, and therefore not in the best condition to catch the Freshman's point of view.

The gulf between the studying of English and the teaching of English is not bridged and cannot be bridged by courses in pedagogy, because the teachers in pedagogy have no special training in English and no experience in teaching English. Whatever suggestions they may make are likely to be indefinite, and are necessarily theoretical. Nor can it be said that the gulf between studying English and teaching college English is bridged by the courses now offered in the teaching of English; in many colleges there are no such courses, and most of those now given are intended for

¹ Read before the College Section of the National Council of Teachers of English.

high-school teachers. For some such courses credit is not allowed toward an advanced degree or toward a major in English.

That the teaching of English presents many problems needs no argument. This fact is attested by this meeting, attended by teachers of English who have come hundreds of miles to discuss problems of teaching, and by many similar meetings all over the country. It is attested by every issue of the *English Journal* and by countless articles on the teaching of English in other periodicals. It is attested by our own experience. It is possible, of course, to teach English without this study; probably most of us began without such help. But how many of us, looking back on our first teaching of English, do not realize that a part of our first work was not entirely effective, that in certain respects we lost or wasted both time and effort; and furthermore that a part of this waste might have been prevented, had we had an opportunity to review the Freshman problems and to profit by the suggestions of an experienced teacher of English?

One step toward the better preparation of teachers of English already exists in certain colleges in the provision for a "teacher's certificate in English," or "final honors in English," to be given to students who have completed certain prescribed courses or taken special final examinations covering a prescribed field. This is in harmony with the first two recommendations in the report just presented. Such requirements would in a short time standardize the preparation of college teachers of English. Even though the courses and examinations prescribed should vary in different institutions, the results would soon approximate uniformity, because no self-respecting institution would announce a standard appreciably lower than the standard set by its fellows. The emphasis might vary, and legitimately, but the results in respect to extent of training would not be very different.

As one part of such a group of courses I suggest a course—or possibly courses—in the teaching of college English. As I think of it such a course might have certain positive benefits not now provided for. It could be made as difficult as any graduate course now offered, and, in my judgment, more helpful to prospective teachers than most graduate courses. Probably most of us recall the request from young teachers for suggestions as to the best text-

books, best printed helps, best methods, etc. But an interview, however extended, is all too short to cover the ground. The young teacher who is fortified by nothing better than an interview is very likely to make the same mistakes other beginners have made.

As one means of forestalling the duplication by the beginner of mistakes made by other beginners, the course I propose should make the largest possible use of the experience of others. It would thus seek to guide the beginner to a more certain and a more immediate success. It should include not only the experience of the teacher who gives the course, but also the accumulated experience of many teachers, as recorded in such books as Chubb's *The Teaching of English*, Carpenter, Baker, and Scott's book with the same title, and others; also in numerous reports, papers, discussions, bulletins, etc., which might be collected into a bibliography of "The Teaching of English." Perhaps this field is large enough and important enough to provide thesis topics. If it is, the man who writes a thesis on such a topic will be more directly prepared for meeting Freshman problems in English than he who writes on some author or movement almost forgotten or deserving to be forgotten.

But the opinions and advice of experienced teachers is only a part, probably not the most important part, of such a course. It might reasonably include a survey and comparison of certain selected textbooks used in Freshman courses. A study of these books would bring the graduate student back to the problems he once faced as a Freshman. But he would now approach them from the point of view of a teacher. He might be asked how to present to a class certain problems in composition, or certain chapters in a given textbook or how to give a certain topic due emphasis, in the simplest, clearest, most forcible way. He might be asked to select the best treatment of a given topic, say paragraph structure, or Wordsworth's treatment of nature, and to defend his choice. Such study would constitute a review, and something more valuable, because his present study would be far more searching than he cared to attempt, or was capable of doing, as a Freshman. It would be valuable also in bringing him back to fundamental principles, to the major authors, perhaps even to elementary problems, to whatever is to be presented to

Freshmen. I regard it as important that he make this resurvey before he faces the Freshman class. His actual experience with Freshmen may force him to modify here and there the plan he formulated as a graduate student, but he is far more likely to succeed if he begins with a definite, fresh-made plan representing his mature and careful thought, than if he begins without a plan, with a mind still pondering problems of minute and recondite scholarship. This shift in attitude, this return to Freshman problems, this deeper familiarity with them, and, let us hope, a new interest in them, must surely contribute toward success.

Nor is such a course limited to the experience of others and the restudy of textbooks for Freshmen. In composition, an important, if not fundamental, part in every Freshman course in English, there are many problems inviting, and I believe repaying, careful study. In the English sentence there is much that is not fully grasped by all teachers of English, much that is yet to be worked out in such a way that it can be presented to Freshmen and appropriated by them. For example: the frequent misuse of "and," and the other common conjunctions; how can the teacher best help the blundering Freshman to use conjunctions properly, to bring out the correct co-ordination and subordination of thought? Another problem is the arranging of sentence elements to secure clearness, smoothness, and emphasis. When we have learned to present this problem better, our students will make more rapid progress. How can we get our students to use a greater variety of sentence forms and types, each in the right place? How can we best correlate grammar and composition? Even punctuation—how can we get better punctuation? No teacher can afford to neglect any one of these and similar problems about the sentence. Fortunate is the teacher who finds a better method of presenting any of these topics. To direct the attention of a graduate student to these problems may prove to be the best service we can render him.

And there are all the problems of paragraphing—unity, coherence, emphasis, the planning of paragraphs. Every teacher must teach these topics. It is to be hoped that every teacher has a clear grasp of the principles involved. To make assurance doubly sure,

would it not be well to ask graduate students to consider it anew, with their present maturity of mind, before the flood of essays arrives? Such study should be a benefit to all; possibly some bright fellow might find a better method of presenting the problem of the paragraph.

The composition as a whole, the outline or plan, deserves careful attention. How can we best make students realize the importance of the outline, how help them most directly and certainly in this respect?

Another problem, not commonly treated in textbooks, but of great importance, is the finding of suitable essay topics. Students work best where they have most interest. To find topics that will interest the respective students, or to direct them to the finding of topics, is half the battle. Many a time a teacher may anticipate correctly the relative success or failure of a given assignment by the attitude of the students when he announces the topic or group of topics for the next theme. If by the finding of a suitable topic and by helps and suggestions in regard to treating it we can make the students feel confidence in their ability to write on the topic assigned, and if, still better, we can make them interested to write on that topic, we need have no misgiving as to the result. I have in mind a book of a hundred pages containing lists of composition topics on a great variety of subjects. Some university might well accept that book as the equivalent of a Master's thesis. In my judgment graduate students expecting to teach college Freshmen might well be asked to present a list—a good long list—of topics suitable for Freshman essays.

The grading of essays is no easy problem. Is it better to use a single set of symbols, or two sets—one for thought and one for style? How many gradations or steps should be recognized, with or without plus and minus? Should these have an approximate numerical value, as in the University of Illinois system described in the November, 1915, number of the *English Journal*? Upon what points should the grading be based? Will the Hillegas scale result in approximate uniformity of grading?

Problems of this sort must necessarily be worked out in the laboratory, that is, in the actual reading of themes. On this point my acquaintance with teachers who before they began teaching

had served for a year or more as "readers" leads me to the conclusion that experience as a "reader" is a valuable form of preparation. I believe that it might well be required of graduate students in English, at least of those who have not had actual teaching experience.

In literature there are many topics that might legitimately be included in a course in the teaching of college English. Among these I would suggest the following: (1) the writing of an introduction to a given classic, to be included in a survey course, intended to set forth its chief characteristics and at the same time enlist the interest of students; (2) original annotations, representing the prospective teacher's judgment as to the points needing elucidation; (3) plans for the study of versification, adapted to a particular passage or poem; (4) plans for the study of a given classic with daily assignments; (5) plans for the comparative study of two poems, stories, etc., or of two authors; (6) plans for relating a given piece of literature to a historical, scientific, social, or religious movement; (7) questions on a given selection to direct the students in their study. As an example of questions that seem to me eminently successful, I would cite Professor Baker's questions in the Macmillan "Pocket Classic" edition of Browning. A teacher who can frame questions that will guide the student to his own appropriation of the content, style, and spirit of a given selection is well on the way toward success as a teacher of literature.

In conclusion, the chief value of such a course would lie in the fact that it would invite the graduate student to return from minute problems of recondite research to major authors, important movements, and fundamental principles; it would invite him to apply his trained mind to the topics he once considered and partly comprehended as a Freshman; best of all it would invite him to study these problems from a new point of view, that of a teacher seeking to adapt standard selections in literature and fundamental principles of composition to the capacities and the interests of college Freshmen. Moreover, it would give him the opportunity to plan his new work in advance of the actual task, and to profit by the criticism of his fellow-graduate students and the counsel of an experienced teacher of English.